

Interview with *Lead With Respect* co-author Michael Ballé

[Lead With Respect](#), winner of a Shingo Research and Professional Publication Award and published by the nonprofit Lean Enterprise Institute (LEI), is the third volume in the practical, lively, and award-winning series of business novels by Michael and Freddy Ballé.

Visit lean.org to read their other business novels [The Gold Mine](#), an introduction to lean management thinking and tools, and [The Lean Manager](#), which explains how to go beyond implementing tools to creating and sustaining a complete lean management system. Both are also winners of Shingo Research Awards.

Q: One takeaway from *Lead With Respect* is that practicing respect is neither pretty nor polite. There's a lot of conflict, self-doubt, tension, and messiness involved. Why is it so hard, so heavy, so challenging?

Ballé: Win-win doesn't mean nice-nice, let's get that clear. Win-win is about getting the business to face its adaptive challenges and sharing the results fairly. Doing so, in this day and age, typically involves addressing difficult changes and disturbing the status quo, which means that key individuals – not to say all – will have to re-learn some or all of their jobs. This is not going to happen without a fight.

People will challenge whether the new direction is the best one, and rightly so. And, even when the new direction is accepted, win-win hinges on individual learning. Leadership means taking people in a given situation and taking them through the struggles of actually learning.

Q: Why have you chosen a novel format for this book and the other two business novels you've written on lean management? What is it about lean that calls for a fictional framework as a way of teaching a body of knowledge?

Ballé: From our very first book *The Gold Mine*, my father and I felt that the novel format would best convey that feeling of practicing lean in a real factory or office, with a sensei, an expert, guiding you. Freddy and I believe that lean theory is not the same thing as the feeling of doing lean. Lean transformation issues are hardly ever simply technical: the political dimension of encouraging kaizen is a huge part of its success. We felt that fiction spoke to this truth most powerfully.

The second reason for writing the learning experience as a novel is that we wanted to capture the system dynamics dimension of lean. At first we tried to write up what we knew as a manual, but we could never agree on a straight sequence.

We found that story and dialogue enabled us to make connections between the essential principles and show the links between, say, just-in-time production and the concept of building in quality to products, or between standardized work and 5S and so on.

Sharing a story allowed us to show that people grapple with business situations, express them as performance challenges, think hard, try something, succeed to a

certain extend and... are now faced with a new problem, albeit at a higher level of performance.

Q: Jane Delaney, the lead character, learns to Lead With Respect by trying things out and learning as she goes. Is there, however, one specific model, one specific sequence that applies to all situations

Ballé: Well, if you look at it from high enough, there is, kind of, a general model to implementing lean tools, which goes something like:

1. Safeguard your employees
2. Protect your customers
3. Control lead-time
4. Reduce lead-time
5. Reduce costs

But once you've said that, anything goes. When you actually *do* lean you learn by facing and solving your problems. And for this to work, people have to work through one problem at a time. People must focus on one challenge at a time in order to learn from the work.

It is said that no battle plan survives contact with the enemy. Similarly, the lean transformation plan is rather straightforward and can be written up in a manual (and indeed, has been), but contact with reality is key to lean practice.

The novels present, necessarily, only one narrative, but we hope to convey how characters feel when they are exploring, finding their way in the fog of what happens, and handling this uncertainty—and indeed learning to handle it with less trepidation and even, on good days, fun.

Q: Please share, as simply as you can, what respect--or leading with respect--means.

Ballé: Respect means making the best effort to understand each other's perspectives—to stand in their shoes, see through their eyes. Managerially, it means adjusting from trying to get team members to share our problems to becoming interested in how they see the world from their production cell. To see what kind of problems they encounter, and what obstacles the system creates that prevent them from doing good work.

The second aspect of respect is about creating teamwork and defining shared success. Again, this is counterintuitive. The leader's role is to help every person to meaningfully contribute to the shared success of the team. There is no greater motivation than having a hand in success with our teammates, and being recognized for it. But this doesn't happen simply by saying it or making tokens of appreciation: respecting people means helping them to develop the technical skills and the leadership skills to contribute to the fullest of their abilities.

Seen this way, teamwork is not about a vague “team spirit”, but the very specific skill of solving problems with our own team and with others across functional – or enterprise – boundaries.

Q: How does *Respect* align with traditional lean practice? Can one do elements of lean such as value-stream mapping, root-cause analysis, standard work, etc. without explicitly tending to respect? Conversely, can one apply the *Respect* model without practicing lean fundamentals?

Ballé: Oh, absolutely. But for how long? When Freddy and I wrote our first lean novel, [The Gold Mine](#), it was clear that operator engagement and involvement were essential to practicing lean successfully—indeed the book makes it very clear that “it’s all about people.” Nonetheless, we felt at the time it was important to first clarify the tools.

In [The Lean Manager](#), respect is once more described fully throughout the book, and indeed, is the key driver of the narrative, but again, following a learner’s path, the second book is about moving on from the basic tools to presenting the full lean management system. As we finished *The Lean Manager*, we thought that at some point in the future, we had to write a more reflexive book specifically about the involvement side of lean, which is how we came to write *Lead With Respect*, and which is why the book is about Andy Ward’s continuing learning journey as well as Jane Delaney’s.

Mastering the lean tools is definitely the first step on the lean journey. But as you progress you will discover that these tools are NOT operational improvement tools per se; but exploration tools such as a telescope or a microscope. They are designed with the observer in mind and can’t be fully understood without the respect dimension.

In practice, using the lean tools without worrying about people involvement will shake the low hanging fruits from the tree -- experience shows this lasts for about two years -- but if you continue in this manner, you’ll paint yourself in the same corner that so many improvement programs have done in the past.

Can *Lead With Respect* be useful without practicing the lean tools? Once again: absolutely, but the long-term results will be disappointing.

Editors/Producers/Bloggers

For review copies of *Lead With Respect* or to interview the authors, contact LEI Communications Director Chet Marchwinski cmarchwinski@lean.org or 617- 871-2930.

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